

# Brief: Commonwealth approvals for clearing of koala (combined populations of Qld, NSW and the ACT) habitat

The Australian Conservation Foundation is compiling data on Commonwealth approvals for clearing of habitat of threatened species and threatened ecological communities (TECs).

ACF analysis shows that the koala (combined populations of Qld, NSW and the ACT) has had more habitat approved to be cleared over the last eleven years than any other threatened species or TEC.

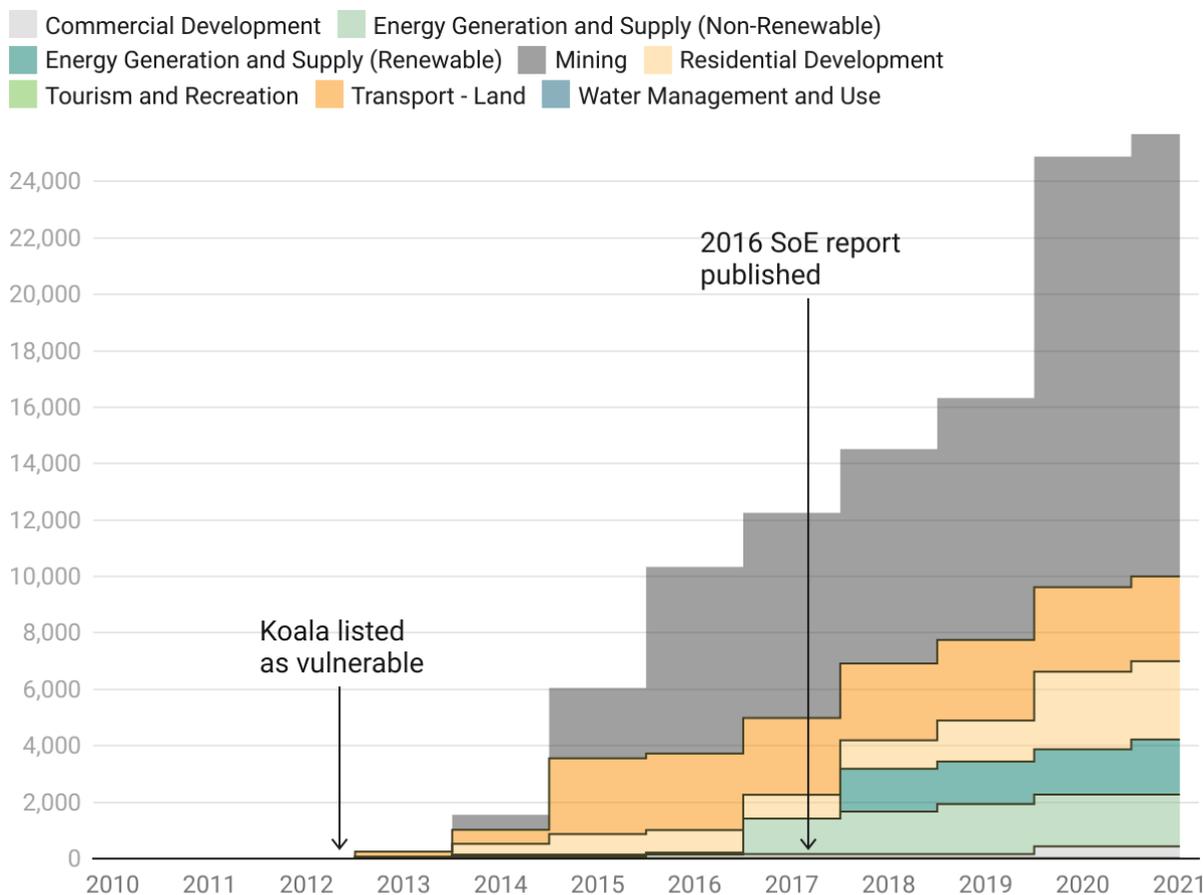
Since the koala was listed as Vulnerable under the EPBC Act, the Commonwealth has approved over 25,000 hectares to be cleared, across 96 different approvals.

61% of koala habitat approved to be cleared was for mining. 12% was for land transport, and 11% was for residential development.

Note that not all habitat approved to be cleared is ultimately cleared - some projects clear less than they were approved to. On the other hand, much habitat clearing that does occur falls outside the scope of the EPBC Act, whether because of exemptions (E.g. industrial logging RFAs) or because of clearing by landholders who do not ask for permission. *This* data shows the level of clearing approved by the Commonwealth.

## Koala habitat

Hectares of habitat clearing approved under the EPBC Act, divided by industry



*Koala habitat was also impacted by the following projects that did not quantify hectares impacted: Upgrade Sections of Reid Street, The Boulevard and Tip Gravel Road to Improve Flood and Evacuation Access, Dunbogan (Transport - Land); Ecological thinning trial in New South Wales River Red Gum Forests (Natural Resource Management); and Warner Road Residential Development (Residential Development).*

Chart: ACF, 2021 • Source: ACF, 2021 • Created with Datawrapper

### Key facts

- A recent expert study suggests as few as 300,000 adult koalas may be left in the wild across Australia as a whole.<sup>1</sup>
- Listed as Vulnerable under the EPBC Act on 2 May 2012.<sup>2</sup>
- IUCN: Listed as Vulnerable (decreasing). Last assessed 27 May 2014.<sup>3</sup>
- Recovery plan was supposed to commence in 2014 but was never made or adopted.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/16892/166496779>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon\\_id=85104](http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=85104)

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## Key threats

- “The main identified threats to this species are loss and fragmentation of habitat, vehicle strike, disease, and predation by dogs. Drought and incidences of extreme heat are also known to cause very significant mortality, and post-drought recovery may be substantially impaired by the range of other threatening factors.”<sup>5</sup>

## Key industries approved to clear koala habitat through EPBC

- Mining (61%)
- Transport - Land (12%)
- Residential Development (11%)

## Summary of EPBC approvals

No. of approvals <2016 SoE published (i.e. 7 march 2017)	36
No. of approvals >2016 SoE	60
<b>No. of approvals total</b>	<b>96</b>
NSW approvals total	27
QLD approvals total	68
Hectares <2016 SoE	10341.257
Hectares >2016 SoE	15338.6
<b>Hectares total</b>	<b>25679.857</b>
Hectares NSW	1521.247
Hectares QLD	24062.21

## Methodology

### Scope

- This dataset covers all EPBC referrals from 24 April 2013 to 31 December 2021 for which:
  - The project was approved
  - The approval notice mentions impacts to EPBC-listed (threatened) species

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/pubs/197-conservation-advice.pdf>

- The approval notice quantifies clearing or impact in hectares (E.g. “the proponent shall not clear more than 100 ha koala habitat”)<sup>6</sup>

## Data source

- All pre-2017 EPBC referral data is ACF data, obtained from government data on rec reports, via ANU circa 2017.
- All post-01/01/2017 data was extracted manually by ACF in late 2021 and early 2022, from data accessed directly from the public EPBC referrals portal.
- Data on broad-level threat and threat impact level was obtained from Michel Ward et al. Ward “engaged taxonomic experts in generating taxon-specific threat and threat impact information to consistently apply the IUCN Threat Classification Scheme and Threat Impact Scoring System to produce the most up-to-date data on currently recognized threatening processes affecting all nationally listed threatened taxa in Australia.”<sup>7</sup>

## Limitations

- We have recommendation report data from 2012-2017 but had to rely on approval documents for contemporary data. Rec reports are meant to be publicly available and used to be, but are now only available on request. This speaks to a problem with transparency, access to environmental data and accessibility for the community.
- We did not check variations to approvals.
- Much clearing either slips through the cracks (particularly in agriculture) or does not require approval because of RFAs.
- The way we sourced the data means that we’re talking about habitat *approved* to be cleared under the EPBC Act. In practice, a proponent may clear less than the maximum they are allowed to clear, or more. We also have data on habitat approved to be cleared in ways that can’t be quantified into hectares: rare flowers approved to be destroyed or translocated with no guarantee of success; habitat trees approved to be destroyed. Nor can we quantify the impact of the many approvals that approve more nebulous habitat degradation, especially for aquatic and amphibious taxa.
- Note that total habitat approved to be cleared for any one referred action, state or industry does not equal actual total land approved to be cleared. This is because habitats of different taxa overlap — a patch of bush might be home to both koalas and greater gliders, for example. On the other hand, the total habitat approved to be cleared for each threatened species *does* equal an actual total land approved to be cleared.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the dataset we have created also includes clearing and impact that has been quantified some other way (E.g. “the proponent shall not destroy more than 100 koala habitat trees”) or for which impact is implied but not quantifiable. However, we have only analysed the impacts which have been quantified in hectares.

<sup>7</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ece3.7920>